

IOWA OUTDOORS

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

www.iowadnr.gov

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ABUNDANT COTTONTAILS PROVIDE WINTER FUN

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

My brother Sterling and I went pheasant hunting this week. It was late afternoon and the hunt was short. Although we found plenty of birds, the weather was not conducive to holding tight and the roosters were wild. Reaching the end of the cover, we both remained birdless.

As a last resort, we decided to take separate paths back to the truck. Halfway there, my dog Ruby became very birdy. But in this particular instance, her demeanor suggested that the "bird" was probably wearing fur instead of feathers. Sure enough, a big cottontail soon erupted from the grass and disappeared down a well used trail. Twenty steps farther, a second rabbit appeared and then a third.

Although she'd like to, the dog knows not to chase rabbits, and I held my fire. But when I spotted a fourth cottontail sneaking off to the side, I decided that enough is enough. At the sound of the shotgun, the rabbit stopped running.

We were at the edge of a picked corn field and the rabbit's heft left little doubt that the animal was hog fat. It's been awhile since I've bagged a rabbit, and as I paused to admire the specimen I began to recall childhood hunts where bagging a cottontail or two was considered a very worthy endeavor. I also recalled, with great fondness, the fragrance and flavor of fried or roasted rabbit. In a time preceding fast foods, every kid's mom knew how to prepare wild game to perfection. At our home, fresh rabbit was a frequent addition to the evening menu.

Besides tasting great, rabbits were extremely abundant. Finding them was never a problem. Regardless of whether we chose to hunt brushy fence lines, briar patches, cattail sloughs, or farmstead windbreaks, we always found cottontails and plenty of them. Rabbits were everywhere.

Neither myself nor any of my hunting buddy schoolmates had the slightest qualms about shooting rabbits "on the sit." Stalking as close as possible, we always tried for a head shot. Instant death and less ruined meat.

Most of our shots, however, were taken as close range cottontails burst from beneath snow lodged cattails or from the weedy intersection of a Back Forty fence line. We managed to connect with about half of those high speed runners. Although these rabbits were just as dead as the "sitters," their meat required a bit more inspection at the dinner table.

The times, and the Iowa landscapes, have changed dramatically since those childhood rabbit hunts. But in spite of those changes, cottontails still abound in all regions of the state. Generally speaking, the farther south you travel, the more plentiful they become. The sharp contrast is that these days, most hunters don't bother to pursue rabbits. During recent decades, cottontail hunters have declined by more than two thirds.

The world has become a busy place. Recreational time is both precious and limited. When hunters do get out, it's hard for the lowly rabbit to compete against more glamorous species such as deer, turkeys, pheasants, or waterfowl.

That's unfortunate. Iowa cottontails still represent an abundant and extremely renewable natural resource. For those who capitalize on the opportunities, winter rabbit hunting continues to provide a high quality, low cost outdoor experience. And, if your aim is true, there's plenty of good eating to boot.

My rabbit is on deck for tonight. I can already smell its fragrant aroma wafting from the kitchen.

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DEER HUNTING, BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

The late muzzleloader season begins Dec. 17, and represents the last deer season in the 2007-08 deer hunting cycle where any-sex licenses are available. The season closes on Jan. 10, 2008.

Hunters are faced with a number of challenges during this season with the foremost being that, coming on the heels of the shotgun seasons, there are substantially

fewer deer in most areas and those remaining are more sensitive and alert to human disturbances. Also, the weather can be severe during some seasons, testing the dedication of hunters.

On the other hand, the Late Muzzleloader season offers the hunter some advantages too. Severe weather, while testing hunter resolve, also tends to concentrate deer and makes them actively seek out quality food sources. There will also be a second pulse of rutting activity during the first part of the season helping to expose hunter-wary bucks. Finally, of all the Iowa deer seasons with unlimited any-sex licenses available, the late muzzleloader season has the fewest number of hunters afield, so there is more elbow room.

Last year, about 34,500 any-sex and antlerless-only licenses were issued for this season. Hunters reported killing about 9,375 deer with antlered bucks making up 31 percent and does making up 59 percent of the harvest. The estimated 5,500 does taken in the late muzzleloader season represents about 7 percent of Iowa's total doe harvest last year.

Hunters planning to use tree stands are reminded to practice good tree stand safety and to utilize a safety harness at all times. Remember that the colder temperatures and bulky clothing associated with late hunts decreases one's agility and further heightens the need for care. Muzzleloader hunters using a ground blind are not required to display a blaze orange marking that is visible from all directions; this regulation was a new requirement during the shotgun seasons only. However, hunters are required to wear blaze orange when participating in the late muzzleloader hunt.

Hunters are encouraged to harvest adult does and doe fawns to help reduce the deer herds towards the desired population objectives, especially in counties that still have antlerless licenses available. Many areas in eastern and southern Iowa are over herd objectives and harvesting one or two does will help farmers and landowners. Hunters can also utilize the Help Us Stop Hunger (HUSH) program to donate deer to the Iowa Food Bank and provide needed meat for Iowans.

License holders for the youth deer season who did not harvest a deer are eligible to use the license and unused tag during the late muzzleloader season. However, the youth hunter must follow the weapons restrictions that are in place during the season and for their age group (muzzleloading rifle or bow), and be under the direct supervision of an adult mentor.

Hunting hours are from one-half hour before sunrise to one-half hour after sunset. All deer harvested must be reported using the harvest reporting system by midnight the day after the deer is recovered. This is the second year where hunters have reported their kill. They can use the DNR website (www.iowadnr.gov) or call the toll free number (1-800-771-4692) to report their harvest. This year they can also report at the license vendor. For hunters with Internet access, online reporting of the harvest is the easiest way to

register your deer. The harvest reports are a vital piece of information Iowa DNR biologists need for properly managing Iowa's deer population and hunting opportunities.

For more information, contact Tom Litchfield, state deer biologist at 641-774-2958.

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DNR OFFERS WINTER VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

DES MOINES — The Keepers of the Land volunteer program with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources has many statewide opportunities for volunteers to make a difference, even during the winter.

- **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle Opportunities:** Just in time for the holidays! Officials with the Energy and Waste Management Bureau are seeking volunteers statewide who are interested in increasing awareness on reducing waste in their communities, schools, and businesses as well as organizing various reduce, reuse, recycle activities. Examples include organizing a community garage sale, distributing information about reducing junk mail, organizing a community household waste assessment team, and scheduling waste reduction presentations at area schools and businesses. For more information, contact Tom Anderson at 515-281-8623.
- **Slide and Magazine Organization Opportunity:** Officials with the Communications Bureau are seeking volunteers to assist with preparing and organizing 35mm slides and back issues of the Iowa Conservationist magazine for archiving. This opportunity is available in Des Moines at the Wallace State Office Building. For more information, contact Julie Sparks at 515-281-6159.
- **Artist Opportunity:** Members of the Friends of Pine Creek Grist Mill at Wildcat Den State Park, in Muscatine, are seeking volunteers to assist with drawing historical events related to the historic Pine Creek Grist Mill and its builder Benjamin Nye. The opportunity may be done off-site. For more information, contact Ken Hyman at 563-262-9040.
- **Recreational Projects Leader Opportunity:** Officials at Green Valley State Park, near Creston, are seeking volunteers to assist with leading the planning and implementation of recreational projects including a basketball court, Frisbee golf course, and sand volleyball court. For more information, contact Greg Haley at 641-782-5131.

Find more information about volunteer opportunities and events at www.keepersoftheland.org

For more information, contact Merry Rankin at (515) 281-0878 or at Merry.Rankin@dnr.iowa.gov

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GIVE THE GIFT OF IOWA'S NATURE

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources' Forestry Bureau has created a way to give a gift of native trees and shrubs this holiday season. To promote and encourage the planting of more native trees and shrubs for songbird and wildlife habitat, State Foresters have designed with the help of several organizations five packets of native trees and shrubs seedlings available for the holiday season.

Delivery is in the spring, and gift recipients receive a unique gift certificate for the holiday. The native tree and shrub packets available are:

Songbird Packet – 20 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$20 designed for a larger backyard habitat project. This packet includes 2 bur oaks, 2 white pines, 4 wild plum, 4 chokecherry, 4 gray dogwoods and 4 serviceberry. It is recommended by Audubon Iowa.

Create-A- Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. Create your own wildlife packet by choosing four different tree or shrub species in units of 50 plants. This is great for small acreage owners who have one half to 1-acre to plant.

Turkey Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. This packet includes 50 bur oak, 50 white oak, 50 pin oak and 50 gray dogwoods and provides mast trees for one half to 1-acre planting. It is recommended by the Iowa Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Pheasant Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. This packet includes 50 redcedar, 50 wild plums, 50 ninebark and 50 gray dogwoods to provide food and winter cover for pheasants. It is recommended by the Iowa Pheasants Forever chapters.

Quail Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. This packet includes 100 wild plum and 100 gray dogwood and provides food and winter cover for quail. It is recommended by DNR wildlife biologists

The State Nursery can either provide a unique gift certificate directly to the recipient and identify whom the gift was from or mail the certificate to the purchaser who can later give the gift themselves. These packets are available for individual purchase and make an excellent house warming gift.

The trees and shrubs will be delivered between early April and mid May. To order or for more information about the packets and gift certificates, call the State Forest

Nursery directly at 1-800-865-2477 Monday through Friday 8 AM to 4:30 PM. Orders are accepted by fax at 515-233-1131 or on line to www.iowadnr.gov/forestry/ Do not send money, a bill will be sent later. Checks, Visa and MasterCard are accepted.

For more information about tree planting programs and assistance in Iowa, visit www.iowatreeplanting.com

For more information, contact Roger Jacob, manager for the State Forest Nursery at 1-800-865-2477.

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